

entirely devoted to leisure is now commonplace, but it seemed less obvious in the 50s, as Europe dragged itself wearily into the post-war world. I had just spent nearly a year in North America, and had seen American prosperity unrolling across the continent like the new interstate highways.

All this leisure, of course, raises its own set of moral dilemmas, which I look at in *Vermilion Sands*. To fill their timeless days, the inhabitants of my desert resort divert themselves with a number of playthings. There are computers that compose poetry, sand-yachts and sound-emitting sculptures, which seemed to be fantasies in the 1950s but have long since come to pass. I trust that my other inventions, like the houses sensitive to their owners' moods, and the sculptors who carve the clouds, will soon follow. One day in the near future, perhaps, in Arizona or the south of France, I will wake up and realize that the world I longed for all those decades ago has taken concrete shape around me.

– “Sculptors Who Carve the Clouds”
(*The Independent*, 24th October 1992)

Crash (June 1973)

Crash was an immense challenge, and writing it became almost a willed psychotic act. At the time I had three young children, and fate might have played a cruel trick on me.

As it happens, two weeks after finishing the novel I was involved in my one and only traffic accident. After a front-wheel blow-out at the foot of Chiswick bridge my car veered across the central reservation of the dual carriageway. It demolished a sign (I was later sent the bill for its replacement, and was annoyed to find that I had paid for a more expensive model, with flashing lights), rolled onto its back and continued along the oncoming lane.

Fortunately, I was wearing a seat-belt and no other vehicles were involved, though it was a close-run thing – petrol was pouring from the engine and the crushed roof had locked all the doors. Had I died there is no doubt that people would have said I was fulfilling the nightmare logic I had outlined in the novel.

But in fact I prefer to think of *Crash* as a cautionary tale, a warning against the deviant possibilities that 20th-century technology offers to the human imagination. Film and televi-

sion are saturated with a stylized violence that touches our imaginations but never our nerve endings.

Much of this violent imagery is drawn from technology – the car, the motorway, the airport, the modern hospital and high-rise building. The car crash, in particular, taps all sorts of ambiguous responses, as I found when I mounted an exhibition of crashed cars at the New Arts Laboratory in 1970, shortly before I began to

cars decided she could only appear topless, an interesting response in itself, I thought. She later wrote a damning review of the show in an underground paper.

I have never before or since seen a launch party degenerate so quickly into a drunken brawl. The cars were abused and attacked, as they were during the month-long exhibition, overturned and splashed with white paint. A woman journalist from *New Society*, then a bastion of approved thinking, was so deranged by the spectacle that she was speechless with rage.

All this, needless to say, I regarded as a green light, and I began to write *Crash*, which I think of as my best and most original novel. It is to the credit of my publishers and editors here, in Europe and the United

States that I had no difficulty in getting it published, and I look forward to the film to be directed by David Cronenberg.

– “Smashing Days on the Road”
(*The Independent*, 19th May 1990)

High-Rise

(November 1975)

Before starting *High-Rise* I was staying one summer in a beach high-rise at Rosas on the Costa Brava, not far from Dali's

home at Port Lligat, and I noticed that one of the French ground-floor tenants, driven to a fury by cigarette butts thrown down from the upper floors, began to patrol the beach and photograph the offenders with a zoom lens. He then pinned the photos to a notice board in the foyer of the block. A very curious exhibition – which I took to be another green light to my imagination.

With short stories I do a brief synopsis of about a page, and only if I feel the story works as a story, as a dramatic narrative with the right shape and balance to grip the reader's imagination, do I begin to write it... For *High-Rise* it was about 25,000 words, written in the form of a social worker's report on the strange events that had taken place in this apartment block, an extended case history. I wish I'd kept it, I think it was better than the novel.

– From a postal interview conducted



write the novel.

The exhibition was a calculated experiment, designed to

test the novel's central hypothesis that a repressed fascination lies behind our conventional attitudes to technological death and violence, a fascination so obsessive that it must contain a powerful sexual charge. The three crashed cars were exhibited without comment under the neutral gallery lights, at their centre a telescoped Pontiac from the great tail-fin era.

To test the nerves of the preview audience, I hired a topless girl to interview the guests on closed-circuit TV. She had originally agreed to appear naked, but when she saw the

the Irishman? It's far wiser to say the Venusian, the Martian and the Jovian. Readers will still get the point.

Corporations such as Coca-Cola® keep an eagle eye out world-wide for any lower-case spellings of trademarked products. That's in case the word becomes common parlance in the public domain. Since a lot of registration marks look messy in a text, it's better to have characters swigging a can of Gloosh or Shug.

A fictionaut has no need to understand the workings of their quantum computer (though maybe a science-fictionaut ought to a bit better informed – or again, maybe not). So far as we're concerned the machine is essentially a de luxe typewriter. But one thing has occurred to me.

Namely this. On the motherboard, ions are trapped in electrical fields. Lots of microscopic lasers, operating at a particular range of vibrational frequencies, tease those ions so that they're neither up nor down as regards spin, otherwise known as angular momentum. The electrons orbiting the ions are in a mixed (a “superposed”) quantum state. That's to say, they exist in a number of different states all at the same time. Hey presto, that's how your quantum computer can carry out different tasks simultaneously, just as if it's operating in a number of parallel universes concurrently – until the “collapse of the wave function” concludes the task.

Well now, what if some of the prohibition windows in your prose are on account of fellow fictionauts only probabilistically writing a particular phrase? In a parallel universe they *do* write that phrase, but in this universe they *don't*. Nevertheless, your poignant pet phrase still gets excluded!

And what if, in parallel universes, “ghost” fictionauts – who are variations upon you yourself – are writing virtually the same story? Scary thought, huh? You could end up by not being allowed to write anything unless you're really fast at it. This latter doesn't happen, because your own doppelgangers will “constructively interfere” with you. But I suspect we still occasionally lose lovely phrases due to other fictionauts *not actually writing* what we're busy writing.

Fast: that's the whole thing about quantum computers.

You'll recall how movies used to be made – with actors performing live in every scene. Of course, nowadays at the start of production the actors have body-scans, in the nude and variously clothed. The ciné-computer digitizes the actors, then it's just a question of simulating their performance (action scenes, love scenes, whatever) as per the virtual reality script. Preproduction still takes time – programming all the VR backgrounds from location footage – but the actual movie's a wrap within an hour or two. No continuity errors, nowadays. No fits of temperament on the part of the stars.

Basically you could feed in a portion and outline for your newest fictionautical saga and your computer could complete it pretty damn quick based upon your typical word frequency use and characteristic sentence structures. Then you'd fiddle around a bit. Fine-tune some of the characterization which your computer got

hopelessly wrong.

Machine-books are *not* valued by the perceptive readership. What's valued is craft-work. Personalized *haute couture* wordsmithing (though ideally for a mass market). I can't emphasize this too highly. Even if you're up against a deadline, never use a plot-generation program, even to help out for a few chapters. Believe me, it'll show. Artistry is what is admired. That's why I used to read a lot of Flaubert and James Joyce.

I think that's basically it as regards the safety-check. Prediction: the next generation of safety-check software is quite likely to look at what we call the “sub-text” of a book, as well – not just the obvious similes and metaphors but the latent implications of what you're writing. Your cultural and psychological mind-set. So I think I ought to say a few words in Chapter 20 about semiotics – the use of signs and symbols – though this is really master-class stuff, and impatient novice fictionauts can skip to Chapter 21: How to Campaign for Awards & Get Grants from Foundations.

Ian Watson claims that the above piece is “non-fiction,” since it's extracted from his advice manual for writers “due to be published by Gollancz-Online in 2020.” A little before that date, however, he has a new novel coming out in the old-fashioned paper format – *Hard Questions* (Gollancz, April 1996) – which he describes as a “technothriller about quantum computers.”

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